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NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
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NEW YORK TIMES

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"Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep"

New York Post
HOME NEWS
March 3, 1950

Journey From Biarritz to Ecuador
By Richard Watts Jr.

The special quality of Ludwig Bemelmans is not an easy one to capture in terms of the theatre. That, I fear, is the melancholy lesson of Elaine Ryan's elaborate dramatization of Mr. Bemelmans' "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep," which was presented by Nancy Stern and George Nichols 3d at the Broadhurst last night in a lavish and expensive production with innumerable actors, many sets done after the manner of the author's celebrated drawings, an exotic background that shifts from Biarritz via the high seas to Ecuador, and an earthquake.

The producers certainly have not stinted themselves in their presentation. In addition to other attributes of a theatrical three-ring circus, they have offered us Fredric March in the gaudy role of a fleshly Ecuadorian general, given to luxury, good food, romance and epilepsy, and Florence Eldridge, as a prim and sentimental English governess who carries her coffin about with her and likes to brood over the idea of death. Mr. March and Miss Eldridge are even more showy than the earthquake in their portrayal of these amiable eccentrics.

The Bemelmans Gift

On the printed page the Bemelmans gift for the fresh and original observation of picturesque characters in odd adventures, both comic and serious, can result in satirical narratives of striking excellence, and he is particularly happy in his half-mocking, half-tender contemplations of the human comedy in the fascinating Republic of Ecuador. He can create a world of his own that may be more Bemelmans than Ecuador, but has wonderful richness and vitality about it. But the Bemelmans gift does not extend to Miss Ryan's dramatization.

Indeed, on the stage at the Broadhurst last night the effect seemed to me remarkably and uncomfortably like that of the South American operetta of a season ago called "Magdalena," with the music left out. The proper lightness of touch was almost altogether missing, and the fun was but rarely forthcoming. It was only in the scene next to closing, where the effort after comedy was dropped, and General Leonidas Erosa was about to die in his subterranean pool, that the play came to life with any effectiveness.

"NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP"

Play by Elaine Ryan, based on the novel by Ludwig Bemelmans; staged by Hume Cronyn; settings by Wolfgang Roth; costumes by John Derro; presented by Nancy Stern and George Nichols 3d at the Broadhurst Theatre, March 2, 1950. The cast:

Robert.....Charles Chaplin Jr.
Clothilde.....Helen Seamon
Aristide.....Henry Guettel
The Doctor.....Richard Abbott
The Cure.....Norman Barrs
Henri.....Charles Mayer
1st Gendarme..Gregory Morton
2nd Gendarme..Thomas E. Noyes
Mlle. Borotra.....Lili Valenty
Vitasse.....Henry Lascoe
Miss Leonora Graves.....
Florence Eldridge
Poppet.....Himself
Col. Laboucher.....Rene Paul
General Leonidas Erosa..
Frederic March
Anselmo.....Rick Jason
M. Hufnagel....Stefan Schnabel
Marsan.....Booth Colman
Alfonso Lopez...Philip Gordon
Jean.....Roy Poole
1st Workman..Robert McCahon
2nd Workman..Harold E. Gordon
French Child..Sally Anne Parsons
Young Mother.....Hope Miller
The Dona Bebecita.....
Jacqueline Dalya
Albert Plaschke..Milton Parsons
Nurse.....Marguerite Lewis
Chimene.....Irene Moore

Synopsis: Act I. Gen. Erosa's Villa in Biarritz, France, 1940. Scene 1. The general's tower room. Scene 2. Miss Graves's bedroom. Scene 3. The general's tower room. Scene 4. The general's private dock. Act II. A few days later, aboard the S. S. Xenaide Ybirricos. Scene 1. Deck space reserved for the general. Scene 2. Cabin 14. Scene 3. Same as Scene 1. Scene 4. Later the same day. Scene 5. A river landing in Ecuador. Act III. Gen. Erosa's Villa, Ecuador. Scene 1. The terrace. Scene 2. The terrace, some weeks later. Scene 3. The subterranean pool. Scene 4. The terrace.

Cartoons

Basically, both General Erosa and Miss Graves, the governess, are cartoons, but, as Mr. Bemelmans drew them, they also possessed believable qualities of flesh and blood. In the play, they are cartoons without the needed humanity, and the General, in particular, added to the musical comedy atmosphere that descended on the proceedings. Hume Cronyn's staging gives a certain air of vitality to the story, but somehow the satire, the humor, the color and the force are missing that might have given point and interest to what proves a curiously pointless play.

Both Mr. March and Miss Eldridge are, of course, knowing and expert actors, but they rarely make the two lively eccentrics they are playing seem human or interesting. Miss Eldridge is, I think, the more successful of the stars in managing to give credibility to a cartoon character. In small roles, Rick Jason as a loyal Indian servitor, Milton Parsons as a Polish refugee turned valet, Henry Lascoe as an importunate chef, and Irene Moore as a too-willing serving girl, are the happiest members of the cast. But the play just doesn't work out.

DAILY NEWS
March 3, 1950

'Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep' Has A Big Production for a Little Play
By JOHN CHAPMAN

A gallant attempt has been made to convert Ludwig Bemelmans' strange and humorous novel, "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep," into a strange and humorous play. With Florence Eldridge and Fredric March at the head of more than 40 actors and with a couple of freight car loads of ingenious scenery for backgrounds, the play came to the Broadhurst Theatre last evening and there were the highest hopes on both sides of the footlights.

My own hopes, at least, were dashed, for not even the good and true performances of Mr. and Mrs. March could persuade me that "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep" was something for the theatre. It is another of those fragmentary plays, with four scenes in the first act, five in the second, four in the third and various cute little "in one" scenes before the curtain in between. Scenes do not make a play, even when one of them is a fair-to-middling earthquake which the old firm of Cirker & Robbins could have built better 25 years ago.

Bemelmans' novel is an outwardly carefree and inwardly sardonic tale, as loose-jointed as Ray Bolger, about a South American general of great wealth who leaves the fancy luxuries of Biarritz for his ancestral palace in the Ecuadorian jungle because the war has upset the pleasant routine of Biarritz life. He hires a Greek freighter and loads aboard great stores of foodstuffs and a retinue of followers which includes a Blue Ribbon chef, an Indian slave and an English spinster who has a suicide complex.

Back in Ecuador life is fantastic and picturesque until an earthquake topples things and buries the general, with his valet and chef, in a cavern alongside a subterranean swimming pool. After 26 days people topside manage to dig through to the entombed trio—but not in time so far as the general is concerned. This happy lover of liquor, food and females has had another of his epileptic fits and has vanished into the pool. Which leaves the spinster topside to care for a baby he has begotten with an Indian wench.

Too Much of Everything.

I recite this scenario at this length because it sounds pretty grim, and it is, on the Broadhurst stage. It wasn't grim in the book; it was funny, including the fits. Elaine Ryan, who adapted the novel, has tried to work in as much as possible, and this is her undoing. She takes the general and the spinster from Biarritz to shipboard to Ecuador quite faithfully and Wolfgang Roth has provided plenty of scenery. The props alone, ranging from statues, a coffin and silverware to a ship's whistle which squirts real steam, are enough to set Cecil B. De Mille up in business again if he ever happens to go out of business.

In the very large cast, which includes Charles Chaplin Jr. in a couple of walk-ons, there are some nice performances. Mr. March conveys the gusto and picturesqueness of the raffish general. Miss Eldridge is touching and funny as the Englishwoman, and Jacqueline Dalya makes a sensuous little chapter in the long story of the general's love life. But Bemelmans remains elusive. As a matter of fact, this very funny little man is elusive even when publishers try to clamp him between the firm covers of a book. In all the scenery at the Broadhurst he just scampers away, leaving the Marches, Miss Ryan, director Hume Cronyn, the producers and a flock of actors holding a bag which is almost empty.

Journal American

March 3, 1950

Self-Conscious Arty And Pretentious Play

By ROBERT GARLAND

When I was much younger than I am today, my family cured me of Maurice Maeterinck by reading "Aglavaine and Selysette" out loud. Last night, at the Broadhurst, Fredric March and Florence Eldridge cured me of Ludwig Bemelmans by speaking "Now I Lay Me Down" distinctly. It sounds exactly as I feared it would.

It sounds self-conscious, arty, and, I fear, for the most part, pretentious. In its on-stage translation by Elaine Ryan, imported from California's Palo Alto to New York's Broadway by Nancy Stern and George Nichols III, there is less, far less, than meets the theatre-going eye. Everything is superior to the play.

The play, curious from the start, gets curiouser and curiouser as it goes along. It goes along from the Villa Amelita in France to the Villa Miraflores in Ecuador, through three acts, thirteen scenes, fifty listed characters including seven little Indians, one little dog and a beautiful big black coffin.

Last night I fretted about that beautiful big black coffin. As "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep" unfolds, it increases in importance. Florence Eldridge, Sarah Bernhardt-like, takes it everywhere she goes. But, while her suits, hats, shoes, underwear, jewelry and drinks are all given billing, her sarcophagus is not. Poor neglected bone box!...

Poor neglected play, I might add. Somebody, either Ludwig Bemelmans in the first place or Elaine Ryan in the last, simply forgot to write it.

What a Manger!

The pivotal character in the play nobody wrote is His Excellency, General Leonidas Erosa. A professional lady-killer escaping bombs on the Gulf of Gascogne, he is, I see by the papers, "fabulously expansive." Taking his fun where he finds her, he finds her all over Biarritz and vicinity.

Were it not for Leonora Graves, his English spinster of a governess, his lady-killing would be simpler. But she, who loves him dearly, is always on the lookout for his amorality. Yet her middle-class Anglo-Saxon code refuses to give him "Yes" for an answer. A dog in the General's manger, she.

And, as the General's manger moves from the Villa Amelita at Biarritz to the S.S. Xenaide Ybirricos at sea to the Villa Miraflores in Ecuador, Miss Graves moves right along with it. Leonora Graves and her beautiful big black coffin. And, of course, the ladies the lady-killer is all set to kill.

These include Clothilde, a laundress; Dona Bebecita, wife of one Alfonso Lopez; a Young Woman Passenger aboard the Ecuador-bound steamer; Chimene, a lonesome servant girl at the Villa Miraflores; a couple or three Indian women and the female-of-the-species likes of those and them. Chimene is presented with a baby...

And with a husband who is not His Excellency, the rightful father of her child, she prefers Anselmo, the General's manservant.

Play Isn't There

Of the half hundred characters that overrun the stage during "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep's" meanderings, only the Leonora Graves of Florence Eldridge manages to be three-dimensional. Miss Eldridge, one of America's top-flight actresses, gets miraculously beneath the skin of the General's governess.

To General Leonidas Erosa, Fredric March gives his everything. But His Excellency can't take it. From France across the Atlantic to Ecuador, large bits of Thornton Wilder's Mr. Antrobus and Ruth Gordon's Clinton Jones keep coming through. Which, on second thought, may be wishful playgoing on my part.

Among the many minor characters, it's difficult to pick and choose. They came, they have their little say, they go. But a newcomer called Rick Jason should most certainly be noted. As the General's pinch-hitter of a manservant, he is of rare good promise. Already Hollywood has foiled him.

As you must have gathered at the start, "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep" is better, far better, when seen than heard. Wolfgang Roth's a la Ludwig Bemelmans settings are pictorial. John Derro's costumes look well against them. Ditto Richard Bernstein's lighting. Hume Cronyn's direction is, to use a kind word, muddled...

So is "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep," the little play that isn't there at the Broadhurst.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

March 3, 1950

'Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep' Opens at Broadhurst Theater

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Two well-known stars, 50 characters and 13 scenes fail to make wakeful theater out of "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep." It is a pity, because this is one of literature's oddest love stories, and the stage can always use novelty.

In a rambling chronicle, you learn of a prim English governess' love for an epileptic Ecuadorean millionaire. One act sets their peculiar behavior in Biarritz. Another takes them across the ocean with a fantastic entourage, and a third settles them and their respective hashes in South America.

Likes Fancy Uniforms.

He is childishly vain, sporting fancy uniforms and always sitting for his portrait. With his pocket money, it is no trick to find a willing damsel, and he does so with startling regularity.

The prudish Leonora is shocked and hurt by his immorality. Actually she loves him, but propriety demands that she refuse his proposals. Each time, she hopes he will pursue, but instead he goes for the nearest chambermaid.

Saved From Drowning.

Leonora has joined his household after he saved her from drowning in the Seine 20 years ago. Periodically she is gripped by an obsession with death, and heads for a high window. On the way to South America, she tries a high mast for a change, but is saved by a net an acrobat has been using for his practice.

This is all pretty weird, and despite its nature, not too clinical. On the other hand it is monotonous but not very funny.

Left With the Baby.

Finally in Ecuador, Leonora thinks she has the General settled peacefully, only to find herself insisting he marry a native girl who is carrying his child. In the end, ironically enough, she remains alone in the jungle villa to rear the half-caste baby.

In the theater all this goes wrong in numerous ways. The source, Ludwig Bemelman's novel, is deceptively sophisticated. To read about these exotic neurotics is like nibbling icing, compared to having a layer cake thrown in your face, which is the impression you get from seeing and hearing them. They are all too peculiar and take themselves much too seriously.

Death Is Touching.

Fredric March has the necessary bombast for the General but fails to make him moving. This despite the tragic convulsions which force him into an attitude of prayer. Only his death in the earthquake is really touching.

Florence Eldridge is more successful as the governess though it is a repetitious part. She gets the zany quality of this split but solemn personality, and her final scene with the baby is most moving.

Valet Is Sympathetic.

As for the others, Milton Parsons is a sympathetic valet, and Jacqueline Dalya seems to be imitating Fifi Dorsay in a hot musical, as she keeps shouting "switt-hot."

There is a charming series of settings for the play, which reminded me, as did the story, of "Magdalena" of a season or two ago. Intermissions between scenes are consumed by pantomines, but all this action "in one" and the numerous characters in full stage action eventually look like a series of parades.